



Focus

The Emission Check Program

Background

The Emission Check Program helps reduce air pollution from motor vehicles by identifying the most polluting vehicles and requiring their repair. This ensures that factory-installed emission control systems work properly. This is important because motor vehicles are Washington's largest source of air pollution, accounting for about 57 percent of air pollution statewide. The Emission Check Program is required by federal law in areas that do not meet federal health-based standards for air pollution from motor vehicles. The urban areas of Clark, King, Pierce, Snohomish and Spokane counties have experienced carbon monoxide or ground-level ozone pollution problems largely because of motor vehicles. Although per-vehicle pollution is going down, people are driving more miles, threatening to undo past vehicle emission control accomplishments.

History

The Emission Check Program began in Seattle and its suburban areas in 1982, and then in Spokane and some suburbs in 1985. In 1993, Ecology expanded the program in response to changes in the federal Clean Air Act. This expansion changed the program to include the Vancouver area, more of Spokane's suburbs, and more of the Puget Sound region. The Emission Check Program now extends from Marysville and Lake Stevens in Snohomish County to Dupont and Graham in Pierce County. Also in 1993, diesel vehicles were added to the program. The Washington State Legislature passed a law exempting vehicles less than five and older than 25 years old from the program, starting in 2000.

The test

An emission check measures carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons (partially burned gasoline) from gasoline vehicles and smoke levels from diesel vehicles. If excessive levels of these pollutants are found, the vehicle must be repaired. The test procedure has been modified over the years to better simulate real driving conditions.

Most 1996 and newer gasoline cars and light trucks receive a computer check instead of the tailpipe test. Data from the on-board computer reveals engine or emission control problems, often in their early stages. Repairs help prevent high emissions.

All gasoline vehicles receive a gas cap inspection. Vehicle systems that prevent emission of unburned gasoline fumes require well-sealed gas caps. Gas caps with poor seals must be replaced.

Vehicles affected

The Emission Check Program applies to vehicles more than five and less than 25 years old that are registered in urban areas of King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane and Clark counties. This includes both gasoline and diesel-powered cars, trucks, and buses. Vehicle owners are notified

on their license tab renewal notice when their vehicle needs a test. Used cars purchased from private parties must be inspected prior to transferring the registration or title if the vehicle has not been tested within the previous 12 months. Vehicles must either pass the test or receive a waiver in order to be re-licensed.

Fees

The Emission Check fee of \$15 is paid by cash, check, or credit card at the inspection station. There is no charge for the first retest, but after that, each inspection is \$15.

Vehicles that fail

Every other year, vehicles must pass an emission test or owners must spend a certain amount toward proper diagnosis and repairs to have the vehicle re-registered. Well over 80 percent of all vehicles pass the first inspection. If the vehicle fails, the driver receives a list of Ecology-authorized repair shops. Most vehicles pass the re-test after receiving appropriate repairs. The Emission Check Program's goal is to reduce emissions.

There is no restriction on who performs repair work, as long as the vehicle passes a re-test. But to be eligible for a waiver, diagnosis and repairs must be performed as explained in the "Waivers" section below.

Waivers

A vehicle owner may obtain a waiver if, after failing an emission test:

- diagnosis and repairs have been done by an Ecology-authorized emission specialist at an authorized repair shop, and
- the owner has invested \$100 or more on proper diagnosis and repairs with a pre-1981 vehicle, or \$150 or more for a 1981 or newer vehicle, and the vehicle fails a retest.

The waiver program allows motorists to avoid costs that many cannot afford. Waivers are issued by test station staff and, in certain cases, by Ecology. Less than two percent of all vehicles inspected receive a waiver.

The future

Cars and trucks will remain our largest source of air pollution. The need to identify and repair vehicles with excessive emissions will continue.

The three Emission Check Program regions—Spokane, Clark County, and Puget Sound—have different ongoing air quality needs. Spokane still struggles to meet outdoor air quality standards for carbon monoxide. In Clark County and Puget Sound, emphasis has shifted from clean-up to maintaining compliance with carbon monoxide and ground-level ozone smog standards.

For more information

In Clark and Pierce Counties:	1-800-453-4951
In King and Snohomish Counties:	(425) 649-7021 or 1-800-272-3780
In Spokane County:	Please ask for the Emission Check staff on call at (509) 456-4454